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chicken charley

By Jack Ritchie

Second Lieutenant Jordan came to my company in January 1944.

I had been waiting at the orderly room window when the jeep drew up and stopped. The lieutenant appeared to be in no hurry to get out. He sat there sipping his coke and talking to the driver, Pfc. Oliver. Oliver had a coke too.

I went back into my office and waited.

After a while I took off my glasses and wiped the green mold off the silver temple pieces. Probably something to do with body chemistry and the Hawaiian humidity, I thought.

Lieutenant Jordan came in eight minutes later.

He saluted casually. "Lieutenant William Jordan reporting for duty, sir." He put a large brown envelope on my desk.

Jordan was a big man, probably over six foot two and from what I'd heard, he had been a fullback in the Big Ten.

I folded my hands. "Lieutenant Jordan, at nine thirty-five I received a phone call from Headquarters informing me that you had been assigned to this company. I dispatched a vehicle to pick you up immediately. The distance between here and Headquarters can be covered easily in eleven minutes. The same applies for the return trip. You should have been here at approximately ten o'clock. However, Lieutenant, it is now eleven-thirty. Where were you?"

He grinned. "I thought I'd let Oliver show me around the post a little."

I stared at him for a few seconds. "The next time you find yourself impelled to look over the post," I said, "do it on your own time and on foot. Where did you get the cokes?"

He blinked and then said, "I dropped in at the Bachelor Officers' Quarters and hit the machine."

"One for you and one for Pfc. Oliver?"

"Yes, sir."

"Don't do it again," I said. "And take those empties back to where you got them. There have been complaints about bottles missing."

The grin came back. "Yes, sir."

I glanced at my watch. "The company will be back in about twenty minutes. Wait in the orderly room and I'll introduce you to Harrison, your platoon sergeant."

I spent the time going through Lieutenant Jordan's 201. He had been in the army fifteen months, an officer for six, and overseas two weeks—including ten days on the slow convoy from San Francisco.

At five to twelve, the company returned from the grenade range and the NCOs began trooping into the orderly room to check the bulletin board.

I recognized Staff Sergeant Harrison's voice.

"Damn it," he said. "Chicken Charley's got me assigned to the garbage pail gestapo again."

I walked to the doorway. "Sergeant Harrison," I said. "Once around."

Color came to his face. "Yes, sir." He left the orderly room.

At the window, I watched him break into a trot.

T/5 Riley, the company clerk, felt the need to tell Lieutenant Jordan what was happening. "When the captain gets mad about something, he makes you double-time around the area. If you don't do it in less than six minutes, he tells you to do it again."

Sergeant Harrison returned to the orderly room in five minutes twenty seconds and I introduced him to Lieutenant Jordan.

At twelve-thirty I walked down C street to the consolidated messhall.

Ahead of me I saw Colonel Mobley leave the building and get into his command car. It pulled away.

Inside, I went through the line with my tray and took it to one of the officers' tables.

As I ate, I watched Sergeant Harrison at his station near the exit. His arms were folded and he seemed very little interested in what the men were dumping into the garbage pails in front of him as they passed on the way out.

I rose and went over.

"Sergeant Harrison," I said. "The purpose of your assignment here is to see that the men do not dump perfectly good food into the garbage pails. If you see them about to do so, it is your job to send them back to the tables and have them finish their trays."

He closed his eyes for a second. "Yes, sir."

"The army does not mind how much a

man puts on his tray," I said. "But it does insist that he eat it."

"Yes, sir, captain," he said. "I already got the message."

I went back to my table. I did not feel very hungry, but I finished my tray.

Five minutes after I got back to the orderly room, Colonel Mobley phoned.

"Captain," he said, "This morning I saw one of your men and a strange officer joy riding around and drinking cokes."

"Yes, sir," I said. "The officer was just assigned to the company this morning."

"That's no excuse. We can't have officers guzzling cokes with enlisted men. I expect you to see to it that your officer remembers that."

"Yes, sir."

"And another thing, that was one of your sergeants at the garbage pails, wasn't it?"

"Yes, sir."

"I saw a lot of perfectly good food wasted."

"Yes, sir," I said. "I'll do something about the sergeant, too."

When the colonel hung up, I decided I would confine both Sergeant Harrison and Lieutenant Jordan to the post for the weekend.

In the evening after chow, I went back to the BOQ and re-read my mother's letter.

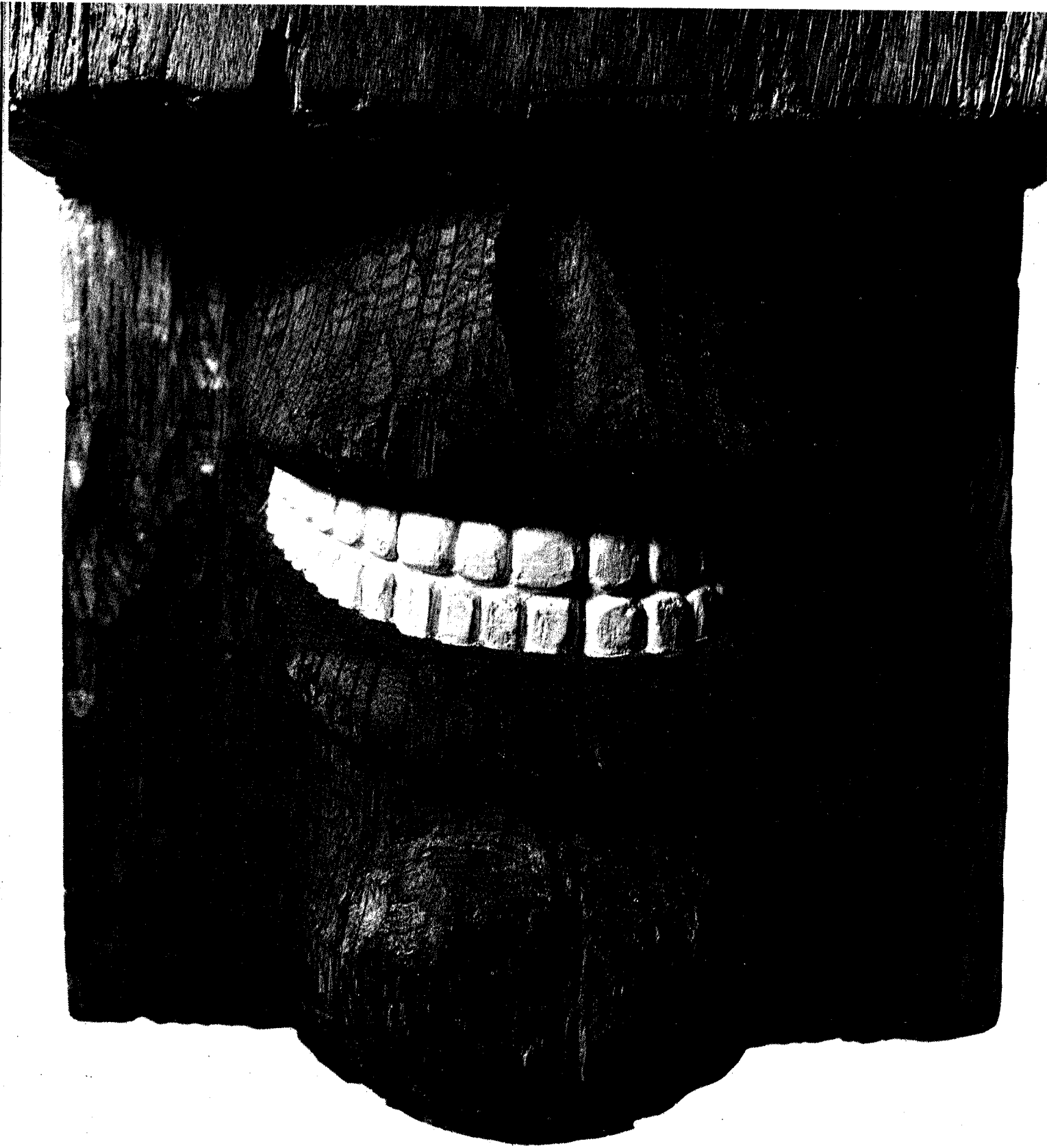
I don't know if you remember Grace Harlow or not. She was that little blonde girl who lived down the street next to the Dawsons? Well, anyway, she's in the Nurses' Corps now and I met her mother while I was trying to get some decent meat from the butcher. It turns out her daughter's in the Hawaiian Islands too and at Schofield.

If you're anywhere near there, why don't you look her up? I'm sure she's lonely in that big army and would like to see a familiar face for a change.

I refolded the letter and put it back into my foot locker. Yes, I remember Grace Harlow. During my senior year at Jefferson High I had finally gotten the nerve to ask her to the prom.

I showered and shaved and began dressing.

Captain Tracy, C Company, had the



other bunk in our room. He lay on the cot with his hands behind his head. "Don't tell me you're going out on a date, Charley?"

"That's it."

He grinned. "With what?"

"A nurse."

He sat up. "How the hell did you manage that? There aren't enough of those to go around and even a doll like me has to suffer."

I took off my glasses and wiped them. "Still waters run deep."

I left my name at the Nurses' Quarters and waited about a half an hour before Grace Harlow came out of the building.

She looked me over and clicked her tongue. "Well, Charley, I see you made captain. And in the Infantry. I would have figured you for Quartermaster or something." She looked around. "Is that your jeep over there?"

"No," I said. "I walked."

"Don't tell me you couldn't swing a jeep?"

"It isn't that," I said. "I didn't think that I ought. . . ." I paused. "I thought it might be a nice night for a walk."

She sighed. "Why not? But let's head in the direction of the Officers' Club. I could stand a drink."

We began walking.

"I guess I haven't seen you since high school graduation," I said.

She watched a tall lieutenant pass. "You went on to college and became a lawyer or something?"

"Yes," I said.

She smiled to herself. "Who did you finally get to go with you to the Senior Prom?"

"Helen Lawrence."

"Wasn't she the valedictorian?"

"Valedictorian," I said. "I was the valedictorian."

"That's right," she said. "You always were kind of a grind. Didn't you play the clarinet in the band?"

"No. A violin in the orchestra."

At the Officers' Club the bar was crowded, but I managed to get two drinks and bring them back to a table.

"How have things been going with you, Grace?" I asked.

She shrugged. "I got married after high school, but it didn't work out." Suddenly she smiled and I was aware that it was not at me. I turned and looked up. It was Lieutenant Jordan.

He grinned. "Hi, Captain, and all."

Grace still smiled. "Who is the big man, Charley?"

"One of my officers," I said. I looked back at Jordan again. "Lieutenant, if you don't mind, we'd just as soon. . . ."

"Why don't you invite the lieutenant to sit down, Charley?" Grace said. "Any friend of yours is a friend of mine."

I introduced them to each other and

Jordan took a chair.

"I'm new around here," he said. "So I still need somebody to show me around."

Grace showed even white teeth. "Then I suppose you haven't seen Honolulu yet?"

"No," Jordan said. "But maybe this weekend I could wangle a jeep and. . . ." He stopped and grinned. "We'd better make that next weekend, Grace. The captain has me confined to the post for drinking coke with an enlisted man."

The jukebox began a new number and he turned to her. "How about a dance?"

I watched them on the floor. They danced to four records and then went to the bar. They stayed there.

After about twenty minutes I finished my drink and went back to BOQ.

I sat down to finish writing the letter I'd begun earlier in the day.

I looked up Grace Harlow. We had a few drinks and talked over old times. She seems to be looking quite well.

In the morning the company marched to the parade ground. After drill, we dispersed into platoon groups for gas mask instruction.

I heard laughter from Jordan's platoon and walked over there.

He had his gas mask in one hand. "If you smell gas, all you got to do is slap this thing over your face and keep it there until somebody sounds the all clear. That's the simple way to do it. But then we all know the army isn't happy unless you do this damn thing by the numbers. So bear with me and don't go to sleep. At the count of one. . . ."

I stepped forward, "Excuse me, Lieutenant." I faced his platoon. "There are undoubtedly quicker ways of putting on a gas mask than by the numbers. However you are taught the drill so that, by practice, the action becomes automatic. In the event of an actual gas attack, there is always the possibility of panic. You might fumble with your mask, possibly drop it, and that delay could prove disastrous. But if you have gone through the procedure by the numbers over and over again, you will have worn a groove in your brain, so to speak. You will react automatically, whether you are frightened or not." I turned to Jordan. "You may continue, Lieutenant."

"Gee, thanks, Captain," he said.

The men laughed.

Jordan grinned. "Now let's all be good boys and get to work on that groove in your brains. Let's do this thing by the numbers and make the captain happy."

The men thought that was funny too.

"All right," I said. "Once around the parade ground."

Sergeant Harrison got the men on their feet and into formation. They double-timed off.

Lieutenant Jordan still stood beside

me. He lit a cigarette.

"Lieutenant Jordan," I said. "You are part of the platoon. Once around."

He looked me over for a few seconds and then threw down the cigarette. He began moving away.

"Lieutenant Jordan," I said. "You dropped something."

He came back slowly and picked up the cigarette. "I left it here because I thought you might be dying for a smoke."

"Lieutenant Jordan," I said. "Twice around the parade ground. Just you. Not the platoon."

Two weeks later we got orders to pack up and get ready to board the troop transports. The colonel gave permission for company beer parties.

I was outside the orderly room when the 2½-ton truck pulled up in front of Barracks C. Lieutenant Jordan helped the men unload the cases of beer.

I walked over. "Lieutenant Jordan, is that your platoon's ration of beer?"

He put the last case on the stack. "That's right, Captain."

"I have been counting cases," I said. "It seems to me that you have exactly twice your quota."

He grinned. "The Pfc who made the issue at the warehouse must be new. He didn't know that these were double cases strapped together. So we got twice as much."

"Take half of the beer back," I said.

He regarded me evenly. "That's not exactly going to make my men happy, Captain."

"Perhaps not," I said. "But I believe the Pfc will appreciate it just the same."

The beer party began at three. At four I left my office and walked through Barracks A, and then B, and then entered C. It was the same as the others — the smell of beer and smoke and the sound of men talking and laughing.

Sergeant Harrison and Lieutenant Jordan were seated together on a bunk near the GI can filled with ice and bottles.

"How are things going, men?" I asked. "Any complaints?"

"No complaints, Captain," Harrison said. He reached into the ice and water and brought out a bottle of beer. He opened it, grinned, and turned to Jordan. "Care for another beer, Lieutenant?"

"Don't mind if I do, Sergeant," Jordan said.

I waited for perhaps thirty seconds and then said, "Well, have a good time."

The orderly room was empty except for Sergeant Yancy, CQ for the day. His feet were on the company clerk's desk and he smiled slightly. "How many beers did you get, Captain?"

"Take your damn feet off the desk," I said. I went into my office and read a newspaper.

We had been on the troop transport for six days when I went looking for Lieutenant Jordan. He lay on a deck chair in shorts and he was developing a nice sun tan.

"Lieutenant Jordan," I said, "Are you positive your platoon is aboard this ship?"

He took off his sunglasses. "Why, Captain?"

Because I haven't seen you leave officers' country since you boarded this ship," I said. "I thought the reason might be that you left your men back at Schofield."

He flushed. "They're here and they're doing all right."

"Lieutenant," I said. "Down in the center of this ship there are men doing KP. The grind is fourteen hours a day, the temperature is one twenty, and the humidity approaches rain."

"Sure, it's rough," Jordan said. "But somebody has to do it."

"I agree, Lieutenant. The KP quota for your platoon is one man per day. But not the same man. I have just discovered that Private Robinson has been on KP for six consecutive days."

"All right, Captain," Jordan said. "So I'll send somebody else down there."

"But not for another stretch of six days," I said. "I expect to see a different face every twenty-four hours."

It had turned to February when our transport eased through one of the atoll's channels and anchored in its position in the lagoon.

The big ships were already there and probably had been for days. We clustered at the railings and watched the giant wagons shell the island.

There were two and one-half square miles of land ahead of us, but it was a ribbon of an island and the widest part was less than six hundred yards across. When we'd studied the air photos, it had been thick with palms. Now very few of them were still standing.

Lieutenant Jordan stood beside me, his eyes fixed in a stare.

The island had become a haze of gray dust, streaked here and there by the black smoke of half a hundred fires. Planes from the carriers made another low pass over, dropping their bombs into the boiling mess.

"Nobody could live through that," Jordan said. "Nobody."

"The marines probably thought the same thing at Tarawa," I said.

Jordan shook his head fiercely. "No, I tell you. Nobody could live through that. They'll all be dead before we land."

I looked at him. His hands were tight on the railing and a trickle of sweat moved down his left cheek.

"We all get a little nervous at a time like this," I said. "All of us."

Jordan didn't say anything.

The landings at the biggest end of the island were made the next morning, but it was another twenty-four hours before our turn came to go down the nets.

The men from the second platoon were going over the side when I went to look for Jordan.

I found him sitting on his bunk in full combat gear.

"Time to shove off, Jordan," I said.

After a few seconds, he looked at me. "Yeah," he said. "Yeah." He rubbed absently at the stubble of his beard. "How are we doing? It's not over, is it?"

"No," I said. "We got about a third of

the island. From now on it's just a matter of pushing them up the shoestring."

I waited a few more seconds. "Let's go, Jordan."

He got up slowly. "Sure. Sure."

Long before we landed we could smell what a couple of days in the hot sun does to a few thousand bodies.

The landing area was jammed with men, supplies, and vehicles, and more were coming in all the time.

Colonel Mobley got the company commanders together. "It's going so damn good that everybody's worried," he said. "Unless the Japs are hiding it, they don't have any heavy stuff left. Just small arms and mortars."

He put some rocks on the edges of the map to keep the wind from blowing it away and we gathered around. "The front is right here and moving up all the time," Mobley said. "The people who are supposed to know think that the Navy did such a terrific job this time that not more than five hundred or a thousand Japs could still be living." He wiped his face with a handkerchief and grinned at me. "Nothing like Attu, is it, Charley? Not much chance for a frostbite."

"No, sir," I said.

It wasn't until four-thirty in the afternoon that we got the order to move up. I noticed the men throwing away their gas masks and stopped the column. "Pick up those masks," I ordered.

Sergeant Harrison spit some coral dust out of his mouth. "Have a heart, Captain. They're just something extra to carry. The Japs don't use no gas."

"There's always a first time," I said. "Pick up the masks and make it snappy." I looked over Harrison's platoon. "Where's Lieutenant Jordan?"

"I don't know," Harrison said. "I guess he went up ahead." He grinned. "Now there's one soldier who don't have to wait for orders to get into a fight."

I got the company moving again and waited until it passed me. Then I walked back to the area we'd left.

I decided to give myself ten minutes. No more.

They were almost gone when I found him.

Lieutenant Jordan lay at the bottom of one of the concrete pits the Japs used for air raid shelters. I didn't know how long he had been dead, but the blood around the black-rimmed hole in the side of his head was dry.

I eased myself down beside him and picked up the .45 automatic next to his right hand. I removed the clip and replaced it with another from his cartridge belt. Then I slipped the automatic back into his holster and snapped the tab shut.

Graves Registration would think the enemy had killed him.



"You get the squad car, Riley, I'll keep her covered up."

On the way back to the company I threw away the clip with the one bullet missing.

It all ended at low tide on the third day when the last twenty-five Japs tried to scramble over the half-submerged coral reef to the next dry land. None of them made it.

My company lost eleven men dead, thirty-seven wounded.

It was one of the easier islands. Later they came bigger and not so easy.

I don't go to the conventions, but this year the convention came to my city and Harrison looked me up.

On the way to the nearest bar, I learned that he was now a police sergeant in Philadelphia.

Inside Gordon's Tap, Harrison said, "You'll buy me a drink, won't you, Charley?"

"Of course," I said. "I'd be glad to." He showed teeth. "You don't mind if I call you Charley?"

I smiled. "We're all civilians now." "That's right," Harrison said. "All civilians and one just as good as the other. Isn't that right, Charley?"

"Right," I said.

He asked for whiskey and soda and I decided to take the same.

Harrison leaned toward me and I was aware that he had been drinking before

he picked me up. "Did any of the other boys ever look you up?"

"No," I said. "But I'd be happy to see any of them."

He laughed. "At least half the company swore they'd see you again. They sure did."

We got our drinks and Harrison downed his immediately. "How about another one for an old enlisted man, Charley?"

"Certainly," I said. I put a bill on the bar.

Harrison lit a cigar and blew some of the smoke my way. "Did you know that Jordan's home town named a post after him? William Jordan Post No. 2186." He grinned. "You don't think anybody will ever name a post after you, do you, Charley?"

"No," I said. "I guess not."

Harrison tried the cigar again. "Now there was a man's man. A soldier's soldier. You could talk to him. None of that GI crap."

He swallowed his second drink and flicked the glass back toward the bartender. "He told us all about you, Charley. How he stole your girl at Schofield and you never forgot it."

I sipped my drink.

"Is that why you sent him to the front?" Harrison asked.

I looked up.

Harrison wasn't smiling now. "I been

thinking it over, Charley, and it come to me that a platoon commander don't leave his platoon unless he's ordered to. Is that what you did, Charley? Ordered him up alone hoping that he'd get himself killed?"

"No," I said.

Harrison put his cigar on the ashtray. "Do you know why I really looked you up, Charley?"

I said nothing.

His face was dark and showed the drink. "I promised myself that some day I'd smash your teeth down your throat."

Harrison had big hands and the right one was clenched in a fist. He glared at me for almost a minute.

Then he slowly exhaled and the hand opened. He shook his head. "Maybe ten years ago, but not now. I got too much to lose. I'd get kicked off the force."

He walked out.

When I got back home, my two boys were on the living room floor watching the parade downtown on television.

My oldest son turned on one elbow. "You got to be a major, didn't you, Dad?"

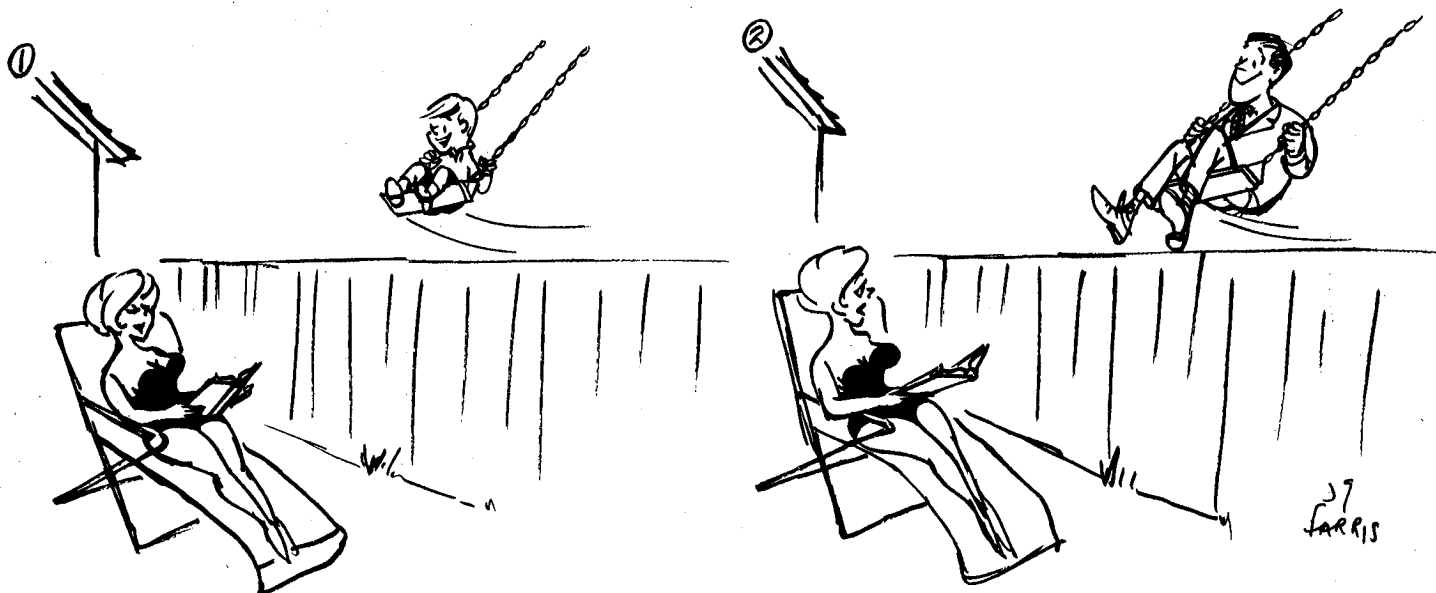
"Yes," I said.

"I'll bet your men would have followed you to hell."

"That's right," I said. "Just to be absolutely positive that I really got there."

My wife, Helen, looked at me and so I didn't say anything more.

After the kids were asleep, I got drunk. □



"Hello, Miss Martin"